

THE NATIONAL HISTORY CENTER

# The History Major and Liberal Education

ALL DISCIPLINES and fields have something important to contribute to liberal learning. History, however, provides something distinctive. This contribution can be enhanced by a more explicit understanding of the relationship between the history major and the broader goals and processes of liberal learning, and

through consideration

of that relationship in discussions about the curriculum. History as a subject stands as the *domain* of the major; this report is intended to aid reflection on the *objectives* or the educational goals of the major. How does the study of history contribute to liberal learning as a basis for a lifelong engagement with ideas and civic culture?

## Historical content

All humanities disciplines explore aspects of the past and its meaning. History stands out as the study of the past itself, an attempt to understand differences associated with temporality and to explain and conceptualize change over time based on evidence that survives. History is not, to cite the example given by the famous French historian Marc Bloch, simply the reporting of events (or, phrased less felicitously but more famously by Henry Ford, “one damned thing after another”). History education begins with a student learning that without analysis, explanation, or interpretation, knowledge of the past is not yet history. In teaching history we do much more than simply tell students “the way things were.” We introduce them to divergent historical interpretations and primary sources and teach them a set of methods for attempting to explain and understand no matter what kind of evidence is placed in

front of them. The underlying skill is a double one: the capacity to sift through masses of information and determine what matters, and a capacity for closely reading various texts. Each of these is crucial in contemporary society, where anyone with Internet access and a bit of curiosity is likely to confront information overload.

The study of history and the appreciation it brings of the differentness of the past also offers students important perspectives on their own identity and on the present. History requires us to think outside of our own experiences in time and place, and thus fosters empathetic thinking, greater appreciation of diversity, and understanding of the relationship between context and judgment. Furthermore, it offers perspective on the present, helping situate it in a longer stream of time and complicate simplistic understandings of present issues. Historical perspective stimulates a more nuanced and often critical approach to cause and effect, and conventional wisdoms generated by “natural” categories inherited from the past.

What the discipline of history has to offer goes far beyond the “historical turn” in other disciplines, which usually means little more than longitudinal perspective. History is a mode of analysis of contingency—it is not inevitable that we are what we are; or, where we are. Nor even that we were what we were or where we were. Neither stasis nor change can be taken for granted, and both emanate from both process and agency. History is about taking advantage of and making sense of an open-ended world of evidence, which assists the historically educated in living on the edge

**How does the study of history contribute to liberal learning as a basis for a lifelong engagement with ideas and civic culture?**



Kent State University

## De Anza College



of open possibilities. What could be more important in the twenty-first century?

Historians' disagreements about the past are matched by their diverse perspectives on the proper scope of the major curriculum. The traditional view has emphasized coverage (that is, breadth over depth) and organized historical knowledge according to space and time—which usually meant by geography, national or political boundaries, and chronological period. More recently, however, historians have begun to favor in-depth analysis, have moved to transnational or thematic categories, and have begun to explore the possibilities for “world history”—which, among other things, has challenged the privileging of Western (and especially American) history in the

undergraduate curriculum. The relation between depth and breadth has been recalibrated in a way that enriches the discipline. Happily, we are finding that enrollment in non-Western survey courses is frequently greater than that in U.S. and European history, indicating that history is educating for a global experience and cosmopolitanism in a way that most other disciplines are not.

History has always been a culturally pluralistic discipline. Almost every history major is required to study more than one geographical area of the world and more than one chronological era. An emphasis on globalization has added the awareness of linkages and interrelationships across historical time and place. These changes have nourished a healthy inclination toward problem orientation in the organization of courses and teaching categories. But we do seem to be moving somewhat from the classic methodological categories (political history, economic history, social history, intellectual history) to categories of people and places (African American history, rural history, urban history, gender history, etc.). This has the great advantage of orienting the field more closely to the interests of students (and faculty) and to the more obvious aspects of human experience, but it might also risk the loss of a synthetic understanding of the past. It is possible that current formal subject-matter categories, whether demographic or spatial, nurture a tendency to study ourselves as historical subjects. But one of the great virtues of historical thinking, especially as part of the wider enterprise of liberal learning, is the analytical imperative to step outside oneself.

History's disciplinary inclination to distance us from our own experience and sensibilities and to engage the differentness of other people, places, and especially times, requires students to approach information and important questions in much the same way we hope they will approach civic life. It is about problem solving within a context, about gathering evidence from likely and unlikely sources, about how evidence from different sources fits together to make a picture of what happened or did not happen. It is about understanding that what happened might be viewed differently depending on whose viewpoint we take. It requires determination of how causes interrelate with one another, rather than a search for a single causal factor. Historians monitor how

individual efforts add up to a whole. They consider how the resistance of those who are not necessarily empowered can change the course of affairs. Unlike almost all other disciplines, history is a catholic field in which methodologies are chosen to solve problems, rather than problems being selected to test methodologies. History is inherently a multidisciplinary field and one in which inquiry begins with the problem and the historical context, not the discipline or dominant theory.

### **Historical skills**

What about historical skills apart from content? The first need is to distinguish disciplinary skills from more general liberal learning skills (critical thinking, clarity of expression in speaking and writing, reading comprehension, quantitative literacy, the ability to organize facts and ideas, argumentation, and the like), and perhaps also from related field skills in the humanities and social sciences. We are especially interested in history's contribution to what William James, in his essay on "The Responsibility of the College Bred," called the virtues of "discrimination" (what these days would probably be termed "judgment"): the capacity to sift through information, to distinguish between the serious and the unserious, knowledge and myth, right and wrong. This is the highest order of the liberal learning skills and it lies at the heart of historical work.

Undergraduate history courses are rarely dominated by discussions of theory and methodology. Instead historians allocate more class time to an exploration of what happened in the past, how we know that it happened, and how that knowledge varies as observers' viewpoints shift. Historical study requires refined skills that enable us to solve problems by discovering information and evaluating written or material evidence to create order out of disorder. History is, in addition, a field mostly committed to the narrative form—it is the study of change over time, necessitating longitudinal analysis and generally organizing events and ideas along a timeline and through storytelling of some kind. It therefore requires distinctive forms of literary expression.

History also places a premium on the capacity for synthesis, which is how historians ordi-

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narily make sense out of disparate patterns of evidence. It combines close examination and analysis of evidence with largeness of context and scope. Hence a history major offers the opportunity to bring together the several disciplines that the student has studied in order to address historical questions.

History values and rewards foreign language competency, since students benefit from the opportunity to explore texts in their original languages. But history also rewards quantitative analysis and the capacity to work with non-verbal data (image, sound, material culture). Above all, the study of history teaches a holistic approach to understanding that distinguishes it, in particular, from other social sciences.

### **History and liberal learning**

The turn to broadly based social history in the last generation means that history as it is now frequently taught touches almost every aspect of life and draws on materials from many disciplines. History is inherently the study of how societies are constituted, and how people conduct themselves in society, always in a chronological perspective—and recognizing that these things change over time.

If history is taught well, students will understand these processes in part by reference to their own life experiences, while at the same time learning the importance of placing any life experience in the context of time and place, and recognizing the multiple perspectives present in any social situation. Ideally, they will bring their capacity for historical understanding to bear on their own lives and the societies in which they live, a goal that suggests the desirability of complementing our global emphasis with an orientation toward the local. History also teaches and facilitates empathetic skills, in that understanding an event requires trying to stand in the shoes of various historical actors, a practice that exercises and extends the social imagination. To the extent that we require students to discuss, write, get feedback on their writing, analyze and synthesize in papers and examinations, and work with scholars through difficult problems in classes and assignments, we are training them in the life skills of liberal learning and educated citizenship.

We need to ask not only how history contributes to liberal learning, but also how ideas about liberal learning should affect the history major. To the extent that liberal learning moves a student from content to cognition, history can play a useful and perhaps major role in liberal learning. The field of cognitive psychology has made it clear that the most effective learning at any stage of education is active learning, and for some time historians have oriented their teaching to the cognitive process, stressing the student's acquisition of "historical understanding" or "habits of historical thinking" through active learning, rather than merely reproducing facts or descriptive formulae. It is not enough, for example, to understand and remember a body of historical evidence; the student must learn to use that evidence to construct a historical argument.

### **History and broader learning outcomes**

The single most important contribution that training in history can make to the liberal learning of undergraduates is to help students contextualize knowledge, offering an antidote to naive presentism. Few historians would be so instrumentalist as to suggest that those who do not remember history are condemned to repeat it. But most would agree that the historically uninformed citizen would be severely hampered in making sound judgments about current events and future policies. This pertains without respect to the particular historical narratives the student (or former student) is most familiar with, since he or she should have derived from a sound historical education a general method for situating the evaluation of behavior in time and place.

It is tempting to argue that the study of history prepares students to make better ethical judgments and inculcates in them a heightened sense of social and political responsibility. This will doubtless be true of some approaches to history and the teaching of history, especially in their emphasis on empathetic skills and on the question of how context in the past affects judgment in the present—a crucial concept in any discussion of moral relativism. It seems likely, however, that the possibilities for historians to produce such learning are no better than those for teachers in other fields of the humanities and social sciences—though the historian's emphasis on the posing of questions does often stimulate the articulation of moral



and ethical issues on the part of students. We have come a long way, thankfully, from the times at which historians were expected to teach specific moral lessons (Christian history, Whig history), and no responsible scholar wants to retrace those steps today. Still, for the talented and committed history teacher, the opportunity to engage undergraduates thoughtfully with ethical and political dilemmas is available, appealing, and feasible.

## Skidmore College



Learning history involves the cultivation of capacities for making judgments about historical ideas, events, and actors. These capacities should carry over to judgments about contemporary life. Like other disciplines, history has its own standards and ethical codes, and history major curricula that include some engagement with issues of judgment are most likely to generate thinking about the ways in which such codes affect practice.

**The college history teacher**

The American Historical Association recently surveyed history doctoral programs, and the results make clear that graduate faculty are not meeting their responsibility to prepare their students for careers as teachers. The larger challenge is to recommit postsecondary faculty to their teaching mission. But the problem is general in that doctoral students are socialized to focus on disciplinary development

and research, which are only partial aspects of the profession. Teaching in classrooms and beyond them is also part of professionalism in history, as is an understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Generalizations about teaching and learning across the vast and diverse institutional expanse of American higher education require considerable qualification. Neither our observations nor our recommendations, therefore, will apply uniformly across all history departments. In general, however, history teachers can and should train their students in all of the liberal learning competencies. Departments need to be sure that faculty members are sufficiently skilled to provide such instruction—and that they actually do so. Some of this professional education could come from outside the department, but the key question is whether teaching as a profession can be a part of routine graduate education and acculturation.

We also need to consider how new PhDs are, or are not, encouraged to think of themselves as members of a college faculty, rather than mostly a history department. This may be less an issue of graduate education than new faculty orientation, and it also will nudge into the tenure system. Currently a new faculty member can assume that tenure exists mostly within the context of the department; one's role as a member of a larger faculty is virtually irrelevant.

#### **Teagle Working Group Members**

The National History Center (NHC) Working Group included the following members: Joyce Appleby, University of California, Los Angeles; Thomas Bender, New York University; Constance H. Berman, University of Iowa; Cheryl Greenberg, Trinity College (CT); James R. Grossman (coprincipal investigator), Newberry Library; Stanley N. Katz (coprincipal investigator), Princeton University; Nicholas Lemann, Columbia University; Carol Geary Schneider, Association of American Colleges and Universities; John H. Morrow, Jr., University of Georgia; Richard P. Saller, Stanford University; Rayman L. Solomon, Rutgers University School of Law, Camden; Tracy Steffes, Brown University; John A. Wertman, University of Virginia Medical Center.

#### **Working Group Recommendations**

As part of the Teagle Foundation initiative on the relationship between the disciplines and undergraduate liberal education, the National History Center Working Group issued a series of specific recommendations for improving the history major. The recommendations can be found in the full report of the working group, which is available online at [www.teaglefoundation.org/learning/publications.aspx](http://www.teaglefoundation.org/learning/publications.aspx).

Even more of our majors—especially those in public, comprehensive universities—will become educators in precollegiate classrooms. The different needs of these majors can generate tensions between the imperatives of content and pedagogy, leaving little room in a crowded agenda for seemingly less practical abstractions. Yet the discourse of liberal education might offer a middle ground in that tension, a common terrain that can nurture historical learning and habits of mind necessary to good teaching at any level. And since many students moving toward a career in teaching will not remain in the classroom for their adult lives, a history major oriented as much toward liberal education as teacher education will stand them in good stead.

#### **Assessment**

Perhaps the most challenging problem that confronts history as an approach to liberal learning is that of assessment. The assessment of history majors usually occurs in individual classrooms, where it is conducted by history faculty who design assessments to measure the particular content and skills goals of each course, capstone seminar, or project. Faculty usually mix a variety of assessment tools in order to measure student mastery of important historical skills and knowledge. We can even move beyond the individual course to measure how much “history” a student has learned, or at least absorbed, over the course of the major. But we do not know how best to assess the value of the major to the student’s liberal education. With pressure from the federal government, foundations, state governments, and others to generate measures of effectiveness, we cannot ignore this imperative. The challenge is to design assessments that relate to the desired outcomes of a liberal education.

In K–12 education, history assessment has often been viewed as a question of which “facts” and topics all students should learn. At times, epitomized by the ongoing controversy over national history standards, this discussion has become embroiled in political conflict over which subjects, interpretations, and overall narratives should be privileged and whether the national narrative should be celebratory or critical. To the extent that history faculty in universities desire to articulate knowledge that they believe should be common to all history majors, they will face similar

debates over what content to require and measure. However, given disagreements among faculty over the desirability and feasibility of privileging particular historical content and the strong emphasis on historical thinking skills and

methods in the collegiate study of history, it seems more likely that the chief issue for history assessment in higher education will be how to develop sophisticated methods that assess learning outcomes without being so reductionist as to measure solely low-order skills.

These assessment methods are likely to draw upon a set of existing tools, including portfolios, comparisons of student knowledge in gateway and capstone courses, and senior comprehensive examinations. But each of these constitutes, in a way, a *formative* assessment—a measure of progress during the process itself. *Summative* assessment—a measure of the effectiveness of the process—is likely to require exploration into the life histories of our majors. If liberal education is, for example, the fostering of an attitude toward lifelong learning, we need to make it clear that assessment takes place long after our students walk off the stage with their diplomas.

Beginning with a strong definition of desired outcomes we can move toward meaningful assessment of what history a graduating major should know, and how that knowledge contributes to a liberal education. What matters in the latter context are the goals we share with other disciplines: critical thinking, problem solving, critical reading of all kinds of texts (written, numerical, visual), communications skills (writing and speaking), and global awareness. The basic historical skills transfer to a variety of occupations, but these shared goals are important for the development of an enlightened citizenry. They are essential for the exercise of political life in a democracy. At the very least, for example, everyone needs to know how to evaluate a newspaper account or a blog.

Do we know how to assess these broader historical learning outcomes? It is clear that thinking about the history major as an aspect of liberal learning will help us in the construction of assessment tools that are not merely tests of content knowledge, but this is a journey upon which higher education has only begun to set out. The challenge for historians is to plot

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the course of our discipline in our participation in this journey. If we do not define the desired outcomes, participate in conversations about how to measure the major's relationship to those outcomes, and help to formulate the parameters of assessment, we will find our work assessed by people who do not completely understand it.

### Conclusion

Much needs to be done to improve the quality of history education, both for disciplinary and for liberal learning purposes. We need to know more about the prior knowledge that students entering the major have acquired through their precollegiate or general education. The sequencing of history education deserves more thought, as does the role of study abroad and the potential of history as a form of experiential education that takes place as much outside the classroom as in it. And we surely need to make better use of information technology in our teaching and in the opportunities for student learning.

The issue of desired historical and liberal learning outcomes should be revisited by history faculty regularly, and we encourage colleges and universities to provide the resources necessary for such reflection and revision. Discussion of learning outcomes not only helps craft meaningful major requirements, but it also encourages faculty to think carefully about historical skills and liberal learning goals as they design and teach courses. Furthermore, such conversations will encourage faculty members to situate themselves within the larger liberal education mission of the university. These discussions in the departments should be supplemented with discussions with colleagues in other departments (including the library and centers for new media) and university administration about the goals of liberal learning. We hope university officials will encourage these cross-disciplinary conversations by initiating them and by finding ways to offer institutional rewards (or at least to remove disincentives) for faculty contributions to liberal education outside of the department. □